



National Movements and Islamic Movements in Tatarstan by Eduard Ponarin¹

The revitalization of Islam in Tatarstan dates back to the time of perestroika in the late 1980s. It was a part of a more general process of searching for ideological alternatives, one that involved all peoples of the USSR. Islam was an important tool of the Tatar national movement that reinforced a distinct Tatar identity and demands for greater autonomy or independence.

At that time, the most common approach was to restore Islam as a conservative national tradition, as a set of certain popular rites. It was not yet an independent political force. The nationalist movement used Muslim symbols, such as green flags and traditional hats, instrumentally, to back up political demands with claims of national authenticity.

Some scholars draw direct parallels between the leaders of the national movement in the late 1980s and the so called "national communists" of the 1920s who had strategically used Communist rhetoric to legitimate their demands for greater autonomy for their peoples. Likewise, the Islamic renaissance in the late 1980s was an important asset in the struggle to promote Tatarstan's autonomy. The instrumentalist role of Islam is exemplified by numerous instances of its non-canonical use, for instance, reciting prayers in theaters, staging theatrical shows devoted to Ramadan and the feast of Sacrifice in stadiums or in the streets near national monuments. The first public celebration of Ramadan was in Kazan on April 16th, 1991. It culminated in a procession of thousands of people to Freedom Square chanting the slogans of the national movement.

Since the mid-1990s such public celebrations of religious holidays have become rare. Celebrations have become more private and local. The only public components left are the formal greetings published in the press on the occasion of a religious holiday. The Russian-language newspapers of Tatarstan sometimes totally ignore them. At the same time there a more self-sufficient strand of Islam has emerged, one that is independent of either the remnants of the nationalist movement or the local government. Moreover, it is this strand of Islam that has recently exhibited some political ambitions.

As of 1990, there were only 154 Muslim parishes in Tatarstan (for about two million Tatars living there), most of them had formed after Gorbachev's reforms. Of the 55 imams, 41 were older than 60 years of age, only one had university-level theological education and only eight had secondary (high-school level) Muslim education. 1990 was a year of great changes. In that year, for the first time since the early 20th century, two Muslim secondary schools appeared in Tatarstan.² The creation of numerous new parishes and building of mosques continued at a high pace; the number of parishes increased from 18 in 1988 to more than 700 in 1992. These changes were not controlled either by the government or the Spiritual Board of Muslims. According to Valiulla Yakupov, the current deputy head of that body, "almost half the mosques [at the time] were built without any licensing documents from any Muslim authority". Foreign assistance coming from rich Muslim nations played an important role in ensuring these changes.

In 1992 the Spiritual Board of Muslims of Tatarstan was set up; previously, the Tatarstan Muslim organizations

¹ Eduard Ponarin is a 2006-07 International Policy Fellow. His policy research project examines current challenges to open societies in Tatarstan and he is part of the 'Combating Open Society Threats' group, more details of which can be found at www.policy.hu/themes06/socthreat/index.html

² Throughout most of the Soviet period the Tatar religious leaders got their education in Central Asia

were subordinated to the Spiritual Board of Muslims of the European part of Russia and Siberia with headquarters in the city of Ufa, Bashkortostan and headed by Talgat Tadjutdin. Tatar nationalists played a substantial role in the process; they called on the Ufa mufti to relocate his headquarters to Kazan, the capital city of Tatarstan, because, according to them, the coming secession of Tatarstan from Russia would require independent religious structures. The mufti declined those calls and instead established an office of his representative in Kazan. Eventually, the emergence of an alternative Muslim governing body precipitated a schism among the Muslims of Tatarstan.

The acrimony surrounding this split was indirectly related to the abolition of the Council on Religious Affairs in Moscow, the Russian government watchdog organization. After its demise, the receipt and distribution of financial assistance from foreign Muslim countries became uncontrolled. The clerics of Tatarstan sought to tap into the financial flows that went mostly to Ufa. On the 2nd International Islamic Forum "The Islamic Education in East Europe and Muslim States" held in Moscow on September 28 – October 1, 1992, the leaders of the international Muslim organizations concluded agreements with the leaders of new Russian Muslim organizations. These included agreements to provide finance, teachers, and receiving students at the Islamic universities abroad. On the same forum, the Saudi representatives gave away fifteen libraries of (mostly) Salafite (known as Wahhabite in Russia) literature. According to Valliulla Yakupov, the Saudi delegations coming to Tatarstan hinted at generous assistance should an alternative organization to the Ufa Muslim headquarters emerge. Disagreement among the Tatar clerics as to how these spoils should be divided greatly contributed to the heat and eventual split concerning the establishment of a Tatarstani Muslim Spiritual Board.

The second principal factor in that schism was the position of President Shaimiev of Tatarstan. By that time the Tatarstani leadership no longer saw the feeble federal center as a major threat to its power. Even though Shaimiev supported the August 1991 coup, Yeltsin proved unable to remove him in the wake of his victory in Moscow. The strong support rendered to Shaimiev by the Tatar nationalist movement made him impervious to the ire of the federal president. Rather, Shaimiev saw the major threat to his power the popular nationalist leaders who he deemed too popular. Consequently, as soon as he had secured several privileges for his republic by concluding a very favorable treaty with Moscow in 1994, his policies with respect to the nationalist movement changed. He continued co-optation into his government of those nationalists who he deemed less dangerous and sought to marginalize those he felt he could not trust. Among the latter happened to be the most popular nationalist leader Fauziya Bairamova (elected the Tatar Woman of 1990), the chairman of the Ittifak party. Soft repression against her and her associates included the closure of her party office in Kazan in 1995 and of the Altyn Urda newspaper in 1996.

President Shaimiev wanted to ensure political control over this continuing religious renaissance. Once a local Muslim governing body had been established, Shaimiev chose to support it to the detriment of the Ufa mufti Talgat Tadjutdin. As the latter was based outside of his republic, Shaimiev could not fully control him. At the same time Tadjutdin was very popular within Tatarstan (elected the Tatar Man of 1989) and thus potentially dangerous. Consequently, by 1995 the schism among the Muslims of Tatarstan had been overcome by soft repression of those who remained loyal to Tadjutdin. This was accompanied by a campaign against Tadjutdin in the local press, including the government newspaper Watanyrn Tatarstan. The seizure of mosques and other premises by the supporters of the new Tatarstani mufti followed. In January 1995 a Congress of Tatarstani Muslims recognized the new status quo.

It was not long before the head of the newly established religious body, 'Abdulla 'Aliulla, found out how far the republic's leadership would tolerate independent political actors in Tatarstan. His attempt to seize another mosque and a Muslim school in Kazan in the fall of 1995 resulted in a criminal case against him. His leadership position was shaken and, in February 1998, another cleric, 'Usman Iskhakov (with support from Shaimiev) was elected the republic's mufti. 'Aliulla condemned the government interference and drew support from the opposition nationalist parties including Ittifak and Milli Mejlis. According to him, the county-level government leaders handpicked delegates to the Congress of Tatarstani Muslims and instructed them on who they should support in the elections.

Even before he was ousted, 'Aliulla initiated a rapprochement with the opposition nationalist forces in order to strengthen his position within the republic. In 1996 he became the head of the "Tatarstan Muslims" movement and later, in 1998, attempted to participate in the local elections as the leader of the Omet movement and a

gave no chance for any opposition leader to win elections in the republic. At that time all heads of the county government had become members of the local legislature. Tatarstan had turned into one of the least democratic regions of Russia. In 1999, 'Aliulla went on a hunger strike to demand a change to the electoral law of the republic. Representatives of fifteen opposition parties and movements, including Ittifik, Milli Mejlis, and Omet, organized a demonstration in his support and against the authoritarian rule of Shaimiev.

In the meantime, 'Usman Iskhakov consolidated his position of leadership, thanks to strong backing from the local government. He appreciated how far his leadership depended on Shaimiev's support. As the Chairman of the Milli Mejlis party wrote, "[Usman Iskhakov] was and still is an obedient tool of the authorities." The domination of Shaimiev in religious matters is exemplified by his personal choice of an imam for the newly opened Kul Sharif grand mosque in Kazan in 2005. The political loyalties enjoyed by the current mufti has helped him win a second re-election in February 2006, in spite of the rule against more than two consecutive elections and even though local nationalists, unleashed a vicious campaign against him on the eve of the elections. Apparently, this loyalty has also allowed him to acquire a personal fortune of money, mainly from the various foreign charities that continue to send money to build up Islam in Tatarstan.